

The relationship between body image and sexual wellbeing and distress in women with polycystic ovarian syndrome

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Background:

Polycystic Ovarian Syndrome (PCOS) is a common hormonal disorder associated with potentially distressing symptoms including abnormal hair growth, acne, and weight gain, which could impact women's perceptions of their bodies and sexuality. This study aimed to examine the relationship between body image and sexual wellbeing and distress in a sample of women with PCOS.

Methods:

Women (n=1605) completed a questionnaire comprising the Appearance Evaluation Subscale, the Body Area Satisfaction Subscale, the Body Exposure during Sexual Activities Questionnaire, the Female Sexual Distress Scale, assessment of sexual wellbeing and a set of open-ended questions.

Results:

Participants reported avoiding sexual intercourse (58.5%) and experiencing anxiety around sexual intercourse (49.3%), primarily due to body image concerns. Sexual distress was severe (M=22.37, SD=12.85) and observed in 67.5% of participants. Findings of regression analyses indicated that body area satisfaction and appearance evaluation predicted body image during sexual activities. Furthermore, body area satisfaction, appearance evaluation, and body image during sexual activities all predicted measures of sexual wellbeing and distress (sexual anxiety, avoidance, frequency of sexual intercourse per month and sexual distress). Open-ended responses revealed that superficially visible PCOS symptoms such as weight gain and excess body hair contributed to sexual difficulties including self-consciousness during sexual activities and a lack of desire.

Conclusion:

Our findings demonstrate the adverse impact that poor body image related to PCOS can have on women's sexual wellbeing, highlighting the need for a multidisciplinary approach to PCOS management where the emotional aspects of PCOS are recognized, particularly regarding poor body image and struggles with sexuality.

Disclosure of Interest Statement:

The Authors declare that there is no conflict of interest.